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**EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE**

**Congressman George Miller, Chairman**

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**Chairman Miller Statement at Committee Hearing On “Reforming the Juvenile Justice System to Improve Children’s Lives and Public Safety”**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – *Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, for a committee hearing on “Reforming the Juvenile Justice System to Improve Children’s Lives and Public Safety”*

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Good morning.

Today’s hearing will examine the state of the juvenile justice system in this country. It is a system that currently affects thousands of children and youth.

It is a system much like K-12 education. There are numerous examples of successful programs, as well as programs and policies that continue to fail our children.

Much like public education, we know that the juvenile justice system can be a place of redemption and rehabilitation or a place where children are thrown away.

The reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act is part of our committee’s larger effort to support children, families and communities.

Juvenile justice like education can be a cornerstone of a healthy community.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act was first written in 1974 with the goal of supporting states’ actions to prevent youth crime and provide certain core protections for children.

Scientific advances that are helping us better understand the biology of brain development have validated this century-old viewpoint.

The law rightfully recognized that clear biological differences between teenagers and adults meant that youth should not be treated in the same manner as adults.

Without question, youth must be held accountable for their actions.

But justice should not be driven by fads or politics.

We need rational policies that prevent children from committing crimes in the first place.

And we need to support effective alternatives to detention when possible, and treat our incarcerated youth humanely when it is not possible.

We know from the research that policies such as these have a greater impact on public safety than locking children up and throwing away the key.

With this law up for reauthorization, we are here to take stock of how the current system is working, and what more we can do to provide our youth, families, and communities with the supports they need to avoid criminal behavior and make our communities safer places to live.

Today, thanks to the hard work of families and communities across the country, juvenile crime is decreasing.

Between 1999 and 2008, the number of juvenile arrests decreased by 16 percent.

We know that when there is a focused effort, early in a child's life to prevent him or her from breaking the law, the juvenile crime rate goes down.

We also know that when given the right kind of treatment, most of these children can turn their lives around so it is in the best interest of our nation that we provide that opportunity.

But the data show a far different reality.

First, too many children end up in detention despite the fact that such policies can actually decrease public safety.

Second, minority youth are disproportionately involved with the juvenile justice system and too few states are actively working to change this, despite the requirements in the law.

And lastly, conditions of confinement interfere with rehabilitation and can increase recidivism.

Today we'll hear from witnesses about effective reform efforts that don't excuse delinquency or criminal behavior but also effectively redirect youth, providing appropriate treatment and services, and giving them a better opportunity to move in a more positive direction and ultimately make our communities safer.

We'll hear about efforts to stop locking up status offenders.

We'll also hear about the disturbing – and growing – trend of children being held in adult jails despite the Centers for Disease Control concluding this has a negative impact on public safety.

Every year, 200,000 youth in this country are held, sentenced or incarcerated as adults.

According to studies funded by the Department of Justice, children in adult jails are eight times more likely to commit suicide than in juvenile facilities.

They are also 50 percent more likely to be attacked with a weapon and much more likely to be raped.

Kids in adult jails also don't have access to real education or rehabilitative services.

It's much harder for them to turn their lives around.

We'll hear from Tracy McClard, a mother whose teenage son tragically took his own life after suffering horrific abuses in an adult jail.

No one questions that her son needed to be held accountable for his actions, but neither should he have been put in conditions that led him to believe taking his life was his only acceptable option.

No parent should have to experience what she has been through. Mrs. McClard, thank you for your courage to be here and share your story.

These are just several of the issues we will explore as we work toward this reauthorization.

I know every member of this committee agrees that nothing is more important than the safety and well-being of our children.

Throughout this reauthorization, we will need to keep our focus on reforms that will help reduce youth crime through effective and appropriate prevention and intervention, keep our communities safe and ensure our juvenile justice system preserves basic rights for the children it serves.

I'd like to thank all our witnesses for being here today. I look forward to your testimony.

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